

From the Army Signal Corps to the USAF, an evolution in aviation history

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Let Benjamin Foulois' nascent experiments in aviation with the Wright Military Flyer, as part of the Army Signal Corps, evolved into a singular armed service, today's United States Air Force.

How the organization evolved

Army personnel were traditionally organized into branches such as the Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery, Air Corps, Quartermaster Corps, or the Army Corps of Engineers.

Although branches were responsible for training and materiel, roles varied and operational commands such as combat divisions and corps integrated personnel from those other branches.

An Army branch can be either an arm or a service. An arm is traditionally the infantry, the artillery, and the cavalry – combat units. A service provides combat support and/or combat service support.

In order to clarify its mission, and confer quasi-autonomy, the Army Air Service was created in 1918, separating aviation personnel from the Signal Corps.

In 1926, the Army renamed the AAS as the Army Air Corps, further clarifying its primary

mission: managing materiel and training. In 1935, General Headquarters Air Force was created for operational aviation units.

WWII involvement

U.S. participation in WWII mandated radical reorganization of the aviation branch in order to unify command of all air elements and gave it total autonomy.

Official records put creation of the Army Air Forces as June 20, 1941, just six months prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. General Henry Harley (Hap) Arnold was appointed to head the new organization.

In an essay for the Army Air Forces Historical Association, retired Col. C. C. Elebash writes that Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson approved a major War Department reorganization March 1942.

Army Air Forces and Army Ground Forces were made co-equal commands under authority of the War Powers Act a few months after we entered the war.

Significantly, as commander of the



Photo courtesy UCLA Library

Viewed from the cockpit, Army Air Corps planes do aerial maneuvers over California, circa 1930.

AAF, Arnold joined the WWII Joint Chiefs of Staff along with the Army Chief of Staff Gen. Marshall, the Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Ernest J. King, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's principal military adviser, Adm. William D. Leahy. Arnold's inclusion into the JCS indicated complete autonomy of the AAF.

Still comprised of two subordinate commands, growth was nevertheless rapid for the AAF. The Air Force Combat Command replaced GHQ Air Force for operational forces while retaining the Air Corps for training and materiel purposes. As wartime expansion continued, more commands

doubled, including the Flying Training Command, Technical Training Command, Ferrying Command and the numbered air forces.

During WWII the role of the Air Corps changed again. War Department Circular 59, the Air Corps further subordinated the Air Corps to the AAF as

a combatant arm, Infantry and Field Artillery were also subordinate combatant arms of the Army Ground Forces, which replaced Army General Headquarters.

"The Army Air Forces thus replaced the Air Corps as the Army aviation arm and – for practical purposes – became an autonomous service," wrote Elebash.

Eighty-eight percent of officers serving in the AAF were commissioned in the Air Corps, while 82 per cent of enlisted members assigned to AAF units and bases had the Air Corps as their combat arm branch by May 1945, according to John Correll, in his article "But What

About the Air Corps?"

Creation of the USAF

All WWII Army aviation training and combat units were in the AAF. About 2.4 million men and women served in the AAF. Around 600,000 of these were members of other branches, such as Engineers, Ordnance and Quartermaster according to Elebash

Eventually the Air Corps ceased to be an operating organization and all elements of Army aviation were merged into the Army Air Forces.

Finally, the office of Chief of the Air Corps was abolished and Congress disestablished the Air Corps, July 26 1947, with the passage of the National Security Act, though most members of the Army Air Forces remained members of the Air Corps.

"In honoring Army aviation in WWII, the most appropriate and inclusive identification is Army Air Forces," wrote Elebash.

The AAF preceded Congress' establishment of the United States Air Force in 1947. The new U.S. Air Force absorbed personnel from the Air Corps and from other Army branches who had been serving in the AAF.